

# North Carolina’s pay system more equitable, though very different

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Unfortunately, that’s not the easiest process to quantify.

South Carolina has recently settled into the middle of the education rankings, a far cry from the 1990s when they languished near the bottom in every statistic that the education system and media could produce. As a youth, I remember driving to Myrtle Beach for soccer tournaments or summer beach trips and seeing billboards that proclaimed South Carolina as 48th in the nation in education and the politician funding the ad was going to do something about it.

It seems lately the Palmetto State has been doing something about its once pitiful education reputation, as they now reside between 25th and 30th in most publications and rankings produced in the last few years.

According to the National Education Association (NEA), a group that produces education rankings for the federal government, South Carolina’s system is one of the best in the country for making technology available to students. Many of the state’s higher rankings are in categories that involve technology, an indication of how recent South Carolina has begun improving its education system.

Even as South Carolina climbs national education rankings, a concerted effort spurred by Gov. Mark Sanford, inequities within the state show the flaw in the local school board system. “The Corridor of Shame” provides the evidence necessary to understand that although South Carolina’s system has some advantages, for many it has enormous disadvantages.

The unflatteringly named corridor refers to a string of counties in eastern South Carolina that follow the route of Interstate 95 from Dillon down to Jasper and Beaufort counties on the border with Georgia. Columbia-native Bud Ferillo gave the region its uncomplimentary moniker in a 2005 documentary of the same title.

The area is widely impoverished and according to the documentary’s website, 88 percent of the corridor’s inhabitants are minorities. 86 percent of the students in the corridor’s districts eat free or reduced price lunches at school, one of the primary indicators of poverty in schools.

In 2005 a lawsuit brought against the state of South Carolina by 36 school districts, most positioned within the corridor, went in the plaintiffs’ favor. The suit alleged that the state failed to provide the students of the districts with adequate and fair education, a constitutional requirement. But the ruling didn’t change much and a glance at the South Carolina Department of Education’s 2008 district report cards is revealing.

In the areas considered part of the corridor, six school districts were deemed “at-risk,” meaning drastic changes needed to be made immediately. Of these districts, several, including Hampton 2 and Allendale, the poorest county in the state, barely had 50 percent of their students reading at a basic level. Fourteen more schools in the corridor were rated “below average,” while four school districts were rated “average.” None were rated higher than average.

Thus, even though some school districts are able to shine with less legislative interference, others are seemingly forgotten. High performing districts around Columbia, Lexington, and Spartanburg skew the averages and enable the state to continue to climb the rankings.

SC’s system allows districts to use their tax base to go above and beyond what’s normally available in terms of education funding. But what about areas of the state where the tax base has a low median income and there is less business to leech funding from? “The Corridor of Shame” is a natural result of such a system.

While the inequities in South Carolina’s education system have long been ignored, Sanford and some of the state’s other newer political blood recognize

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the glaring disparities. On the governor’s website, education is one of his five major priorities.

He said this about his state’s education system: “Let’s recognize our wide-ranging school district sizes and structures for what they are – in some cases a throwback to the era of segregation, and so let’s instead move toward a system of one district per county.”

Even though South Carolina still has 85 districts and only 46 counties, the Palmetto State has come a long way since the 1950s when unbelievably there were 1,220 districts in the state. Segregation was a chief contributor to that astronomical amount, but even as segregation has technically been removed, Sanford’s office seems to think it persists in certain parts of the state.

Further evidence of South Carolina’s educational divide can be found in Orangeburg County. I-95 cuts right through the county and head football coaches at high schools in Orangeburg School District 4 and 5, located in the county’s eastern portion, make around \$20,000 less than coaches on the west side of the highway divide.

West of the highway in a more affluent portion of the county, Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School football coach Tommy Brown pulls in \$78,367 per season to coach football.

Across the interstate, coaches at Lake Marion and Edisto high schools make just over \$58,000 for duties apparently very similar to what Brown does at O-W. Edisto’s coach Andy Palmer is even the athletic director at his school and makes significantly less than Brown for what would seem to be more work.

Orangeburg-Wilkinson’s Orangeburg District 5 received a below average rating in the state’s district report cards, while Edisto’s Orangeburg District 4 was rated below average. Lake Marion High School resides in Orangeburg District 3, a system that received an “at-risk” classification.

All three of the districts are failing to perform up to state standards and yet one of the three districts still pays its coaches markedly better than the neighboring districts in the shameful corridor. That speaks to the districts’ priorities more than anything.

Gov. Sanford’s Education Reform Council produced a report in 2006 that made numerous recommendations to the governor about how to improve South Carolina’s education system. One proposal suggested focusing enhancement efforts on struggling districts considering that large portions of the rest of the state were performing well. Improving districts like those in the “Corridor of Shame” would help the state continue to heighten its education reputation.

Another recommendation that the council made was to continue paring down the number of districts, not because of racial reasons, but due to the amount of “needlessly duplicated functions and costs” that South Carolina taxpayers suffered from.

But it’s difficult to condemn South Carolina’s system, just as it’s wrong to say North Carolina’s education structures are without fault. But I feel like South Carolina’s system is too inequitable and that it’s incredibly easy to forget about

aren’t as distant from the pack as some of SC’s lowest performing schools.

Yet, there are some facets of S.C.’s education system that seem to work very well. The idea of local government running education is in my opinion a pretty good idea, a sentiment echoed by many of the school administrators I interviewed for this series. White Knoll High School athletic director Bryan Butz reveals some of the reasons why that system is effective.

“Intuition would tell me the more local based you are the more options you might have and the less bureaucracy would be involved,” said Butz, a Kansas native. “So if I had to choose I would probably say the more locally run, in everything not just the education system, would be the best way to do things. Everything’s not the same in Raleigh as it is in Southport.”

The localized system enables South Carolina districts to pay their coaches very well if they deem it a priority. But not everyone is impressed by South Carolina districts’ varying abilities to pay coaches.

South Brunswick athletic director Chris Roehner thinks coaching salaries in the two states bare out some of the differences in North Carolina and South Carolina’s education systems.

“Looking at the salaries of coaches, in that teachers’ pay

is based on a salary scale and coaches are based on a salary scale, it looks like North Carolina is a lot more organized and wants to make sure their employees are paid properly, but at the same time I think they want to create an educational system that’s going to benefit the kids,” said Roehner.

“Whereas in South Carolina their educational standards might not be up to par with North Carolina’s. And it’s very obvious if they’re going to pay head coaches that much money, that there is more of an interest in athletics than there is in academics.”

Even as North Carolina fails in many comparisons to match S.C. coaching salaries, numerous districts within S.C. also come up short. This illustrates another issue with local boards running the education system that they get most of their funding from their school district. According to the NEA, S.C.’s state government only provides a fourth of education funding. Compare that to N.C., where the state government provides half of the education monies.


If a school system is located in an economically depressed region then that district is inherently going to struggle to fund educational programs for their students, as well as have a hard time retaining promising administrators, teachers and coaches. If the districts can’t produce

educated graduates that will return to the area after college, they have a hard time attracting development and investment, which in turn limits their ability to fund their schools. The I-95 corridor’s struggles have been perpetuated by this pitiless cycle.

Any North Carolina resident thinking that South Carolina has the right idea in localizing education needs to think twice. While the system can enable schools to achieve great things, it’s inequitable and all too often forgets underachieving areas of the state. Former President George W. Bush’s infamous “No Child Left Behind” education legislation seemed directly tailored for Deep South states like South Carolina, where your level of achievement depends on where you reside.

Though North Carolina’s system can be overly bureaucratic, a danger that bogs down progress, residents of the state can be proud that N.C.’s way of educating its children ensures that realistically very few children get left behind. While that may mean coaches aren’t paid as well in our state, it also makes certain that far fewer students fall through the proverbial crack.

*Bret McCormick is the sports editor of The State Port Pilot. Contact him by email at sports@stateportpilot.com.*



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